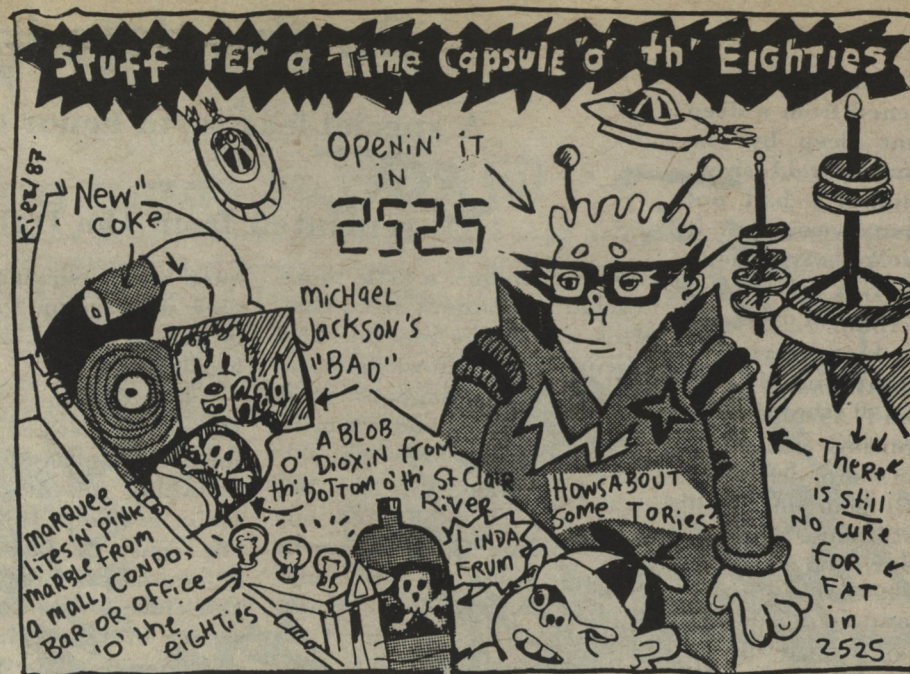




Graphic/The Dalhousie Gazette



Graphic/TheVarsity

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"Traditionally, disabled students in Montreal go to Concordia, which is a very accessible university," said Miller.

Accessibility can be interpreted as the degree to which an environment allows or limits a person to function independently. When delegates at the founding conference of NEADS tried to establish the concerns of the disabled, they looked at the limited accessibility to education for the disabled and tried to draw up specific recommendations that would improve it.

The delegates looked at the specific needs of each disability group and pointed out necessary improvements to the post-secondary education systems to accommodate these students. Hearing-impaired students attempted to construct the "perfect environment" for learning which included faculty, staff, and technology geared towards students with hearing problems. The delegates recommended that universities budget for sign language interpreters, tele-type machines for the deaf, and computer print-out captioning for lecture material as well as specialized personnel.

Learning disabled students have an "invisible" disability which many

people confuse with mental retardation or extremely low intelligence. Since most learning disabled students are of average or above average intelligence, delegates suggested that universities need

to develop definitive diagnostic tests to detect disabilities early, perhaps in high school. Then universities can inform their professors on the special needs of the learning disabled and modify course requirements to accommodate them.

Visually impaired and blind students counted improved access to brailled and taped publications and the establishment of a paid national reader service as two projects that would make post secondary education manageable. The CNIB National Library and special libraries for the blind at Trent University and the University of British Columbia can presently provide inter-library loans for blind university students but it is costly and often inefficient.

Mobility impaired students probably receive the most public attention due to their visible disabilities and they recommend improved physical accessibility to universities which allows them to integrate themselves into the academic community. They were concerned that when universities make an effort to accommodate the disabled, they tend to specialize their programs and facilities to one disability group, which limits opportunities for students with other disabilities.

But the delegates also suggested general programs that would benefit all disabled students. They strongly recommended a full time coordinator for disabled student services at each university to look after the specific needs at a particular campus.

At the University of Calgary, the coordinator works to introduce disabled students to the campus and the services available to them. The position was funded under a provincial government grant but the coordinator's success has prompted the administration to take on her salary once the grant runs out.

Concordia's reputation as one of Canada's most accessible schools is due in part to the efforts of their full time disabled student services coordinator. Many attribute the high physical accessibility and special services to the work of coordinator Ann Kerby. She works with several local and national disabled consumer groups to address the needs of all disability groups.

But while coordinators make valuable contributions to the post secondary education of the disabled, they stress the involvement of the disabled students themselves in improving accessibility. For example, the University of Calgary disabled services coordinator is trying to encourage disabled students to take issues into their own hands, instead of relying totally on the coordinator.

Larry McCloskey, the coordinator for the disabled at Carleton University, was active in the formation of NEADS, the national disabled student network because he thinks that the disabled need to voice their concerns.

"In the true spirit of the consumer movement, disabled students will represent themselves. As a university

employee who works with disabled

students, it has always seemed to me that the best way to serve my client population is to ask and to be told by those who know," said McCloskey.

While financial considerations and physical obstacles create formidable barriers between the disabled and post secondary education, disabled students feel they are most hindered by the negative attitudes people have towards their disability.

"The chances for higher education decreases with disability. The disabled are under-educated and have a 80-90% unemployment rate. And since their chances of getting jobs would improve with education, it is more important that disabled people get education than any other group," said Frank Smith of NEADS.

While Smith said employment is one important reason to improve access to education for the disabled, he doesn't think it's the only reason.

Disabled students often find themselves channeled into a vocational program designed to make them "productive" members of their society. Counsellors with government education departments often urge disabled students into marketable programs of study such as typing, welding or another trade.

"Education for the disabled is often tied into employment which benefits society but not necessarily the disabled person," said Smith.

If disabled students want to study at the university level, they are encouraged to take commerce or education instead of a general arts or science degree. They are rarely given funding to study at the graduate level or to pursue a career as a academic. University administrations and governments give the disabled the distinct impression that education for its own sake is a luxury that they should not expect.

These attitudes make it increasingly important for disabled students take their education into their own hands. The disabled student community needs to keep fighting for accessibility. But before educators and administrators will make those changes to the learning environment, disabled students have to make their needs well known. The disabled community has to break down the barriers their society has created out of ignorance or fear by sensitizing people to the realities of disabled life.

"NEADS is not just an office in Ottawa. The organization is run by a student board of directors which reflects the diversity of the organization itself. There are representatives of all different regions of Canada and from all disability groups," said Frank Smith.

"Large groups like NEADS can do a lot but students on particular campuses need to get together and tell people what they need," said Frank Smith.

THE END . . .